

US marshals capture man who fled Texas rape trial

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HOUSTON (AP) — A man who fled his trial a day before being convicted in the repeated group sexual assault of an 11-year-old Texas girl was captured Tuesday, according to the U.S. Marshals Service.

Eric McGowen was arrested after he was found in an apartment in northeast Houston, said Alfredo Perez, a spokesman for the Marshals Service. Information provided to the Gulf Coast Violent Offenders Task Force led officials to McGowen, said Perez, who declined to release further details.

Task force members arrested McGowen without incident and turned him over to Texas Rangers who were taking him back to Liberty County, where he was convicted, Perez said. Messages seeking additional details were left for a Liberty County Sheriff's Office spokesman.

Authorities had been searching for McGowen since he fled his trial Aug. 29, the same day the girl tearfully testified about the attacks in her hometown of Cleveland, about 45 miles northeast of Houston. The trial went on without him and McGowen was convicted the next day of aggravated sexual assault of a child and sentenced to 99 years in prison.

McGowen was one of 20 men and boys who authorities say repeatedly sexually assaulted the girl over a period of months in late 2010. He was the first defendant to stand trial in the case. Before his trial, all six juveniles and two of the 14 adults charged had pleaded guilty. Since McGowen's conviction, four other adults have pleaded guilty.

His disappearance was the latest twist in a case that divided the small town of Cleveland, both because of the horrific allegations and suggestions from some residents that the girl was partly responsible because of her appearance. Police began investigating after one of the girl's classmates told a teacher he saw video of her being sexually assaulted in an abandoned trailer.

Prosecutors' case against McGowen included a videotaped confession and testimony from nearly a dozen witnesses, including the girl, who is now 13.